

# indian indentured workers in fiji

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SHIU PRASAD





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### PREFACE

This essay describes the life of indentured Indian labourers in Labasa as revealed by interviews with more than twenty aged indentured workers who still live in the area, as well as by a study of written records. Although some discrepancies and exaggerations might have crept into some oral accounts, comparison with the documentary and other evidence indicates that the former indentured labourers I interviewed and reinterviewed generally gave valid testimony. For written sources and for a framework for my study, I relied first on Dr. K. L. Gillion's excellent book, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, and followed the leads he gave to other written sources.



# CHAPTER 1

## *Introduction*

European settlement in Fiji increased from the 1860s.<sup>2</sup> The main aim was to develop cotton and coconut plantations. Until 1879, labour for these small estates (there were 648 planters by 1874) was imported from nearby island groups, especially the New Hebrides, and the Solomon, Gilbert, Ellice and Tokelau Islands. But the stricter enforcement of new regulations to eradicate the abuses in blackbirding had led to considerable difficulty in obtaining recruits. Some Fijian workers were available, but in the Deed of Cession of 10 October 1874, the British Government had pledged to preserve Fijian interests and the Fijian way of life. To employ Fijians as labourers could disrupt Fijian social structure and disorganize the village economy. Moreover, Fijians were not inclined to do long hours of routine work, particularly as the pay was low, and they were reluctant to move out of the village and work for Europeans for long periods. Hence the first Governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon, turned his attention to Indian labour, which had gained a good reputation in Trinidad, Mauritius, British Guiana (Guyana) and Natal.<sup>1</sup>

The British Government's reluctant acceptance of Fiji, and its insistence that it could not provide more than the hundred thousand dollars in financial backing which had already been given, meant that Governor Gordon succeeded in maintaining peace and prosperity if he co-operated with both Fijians and overseas investors. Indian labour seemed to make it possible to preserve the Fijian social structure and supply the planters with labour — thus satisfying both major classes and facilitating commercial development. This in turn would provide taxation and customs duties which would enable the government to provide various services. These considerations led Gordon to sign an agreement with the Government of India whereby the Indian labourers could be brought to Fiji for five years' indenture. Recruits were to serve where the Government directed and were subject to penal sanctions.<sup>2</sup>

By the terms of the agreement recruiters were established in each district of India from which recruits were sought. Recruiters had to obtain a licence from the magistrate of the district. On finding the recruit, the recruiter explained some of the conditions of the contract and took him to the sub-agent, who was the appointee of the Fiji



Government's agent, resident at first in Calcutta and later in Madras. The recruit was then taken to the district magistrate by the sub-agent. Before the magistrate, the terms of the contract were explained to the recruit. Then he was taken to the central depot, where he underwent a medical examination and was kept until a ship arrived to take him to Fiji.

It is wrong to think that economic depression and over-population led Indians to jump at the chance of fleeing to Fiji. Although recent famine in India and personal difficulties like family quarrels, broken homes or rejected suitors, disputes with the police, the desire for adventure, the opportunity to elope or the desire to escape from social obligations at home stimulated some to sign the indenture contract, a more important cause for signing appears to have been the exaggerated picture of Fiji portrayed by the recruiters. There is ample evidence that Indian peasants, learning that they would have to cross the ocean, refused at first to be enlisted, because crossing the *kalapani* (black water) would mean loss of caste. By tradition, anyone who went to sea had to be purified with holy water from the Ganges. This involved a lot of expensive ritual which no ordinary Indian could afford.

The recruiters were paid by the number of workers they engaged, and they lied and misled many people. They indicated that Fiji was near Calcutta, that it was a place of abundance excelling India, and that huge wages could be earned there. In most cases it seems that no reference was made to the penal clauses in the indenture contract. Some recruits had no alternative, for they were intimidated by the recruiters, who told them that if they did not give favourable answers to the sub-agents, they would be beaten and imprisoned for the money already spent on them. Some recruits were hood-winked into thinking that they would not have to cross the *kalapani* and were going to be employed as clerks and teachers. In other cases, they were bribed and kidnapped.

Since the magistrates were busy men and burdened with other responsibilities, they merely asked the recruits whether they were going willingly. The answers could not be in the negative, for the ignorant Indian, warned by the recruiter to be afraid of the *sahib's* wrath, had been indoctrinated to say "yes" to all questions.

No married woman could be recruited unless she was accompanied by her husband. Just over forty women were brought for every hundred men.<sup>3</sup> Those recorded as married included some who accepted 'depot husbands' through the compulsion of sub-agents.<sup>4</sup>

In all, from 1879 to 1916, some 60,537 emigrants signed the indenture contract. Of the 45,833 who came from Calcutta and were collected initially in Bengal and Bihar and later in the north-west (mainly Uttar Pradesh), 16.1 per cent were of high castes, 31.3 per cent were of

middle agricultural castes, 6.7 per cent were of artisan castes, 31.2 per cent were of low or untouchable castes. Only 14.6 per cent were Muslims and 0.1 per cent were Christians. The 15,132 Tamil-and Telegu-speaking people who came from South India (from around the Madras and Malabar coasts respectively) were predominantly of middle agricultural castes. The recruitment in South India commenced when it became difficult to obtain recruits in North India.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the emigrants were single men. Sixty-eight per cent of them were between twenty and thirty years of age. Since most of them from different castes ate together in the depots in India, sailed together for Fiji in the same ship as *jahaji bhais* (ship -brothers)<sup>6</sup> and found no religious veterans who could compel them to adhere to caste norms and values, in the new environment many rules were relaxed and practices abandoned, as was to be expected.

The first batch of 498 indentured Indians arrived in Fiji on 14 May 1879, in the ship *Leonidas*. Their initial work began in small sugar-cane,<sup>7</sup> coconut and cotton farms. A year later, with encouragement from the Fiji Government, the Colonial Sugar Refining (CSR) Company of Sydney extended its operations to Fiji. The rapid expansion of the sugar industry ensured that Indian immigration would continue, and one of the areas where cane thrived best was Labasa.

The indentured Indians were first introduced on the plantations of Labasa in 1890, but it was not until 1894 that the CSR Company established its sugar mill there.<sup>8</sup> By 1900 the Indian labourers were working not only in the central estate of Labasa but also in the estates of Wailevu, Natabucola (Natabecola), Batinikama, Vuo or Vunika, Nagigi or Matnilabasa, Naleba, Waiwai (Coqeloa), Waibata, Vunivutu, Daku and Laga Laga. More Indians were brought in as the need increased. Some returned at their own expense to India after five years' service, and some stayed and served another five years before returning to India at the Fiji Government's expense. Most preferred to remain in Labasa after their contract expired, and opened up businesses or leased land and became cane-cultivators for the CSR Company.<sup>9</sup> This process continued until 1916 when further indenture was abolished, but those already on contract worked out their term until 1920. From the beginning it was reinforced by chain migration, with migrants in Fiji sending for relatives from India.



## CHAPTER 2

### *Housing for Indentured Labourers in Labasa*

The first batch of indentured labourers to arrive in Labasa were fed by the CSR overseer, then they were taken to the lines and were allocated rooms, with a wooden bunk fixed to the wall, a sheet and a blanket each. Either three single men were allocated to each room, or a married couple occupied a room with up to three children.

The lines were built in a clearing south-west of where the mill is today. They were like barracks: long buildings, with corrugated iron roofs overhanging on either side to provide shelter, and wooden walls without windows. After 1908, public kitchens were constructed but so close to the lines that smoke blew into the rooms. Each line had thirteen rooms on each side and each room measured ten feet by seven feet. The floor had an irregular surface and it was left to the immigrants to level and gloss it with cow dung and clay as they had done in India. The rooms were separated by a partition which ended three-quarters of the way to the ceiling. The rest was covered with wire netting. Anyone could climb up the partition and look down into the next room.

Toilets were placed some distance from the line. A partition across the middle of the toilet divided it into two sections, one for females, the other for males. Toilet facilities were nevertheless better than expected and generally better than those in India.

Some new lines were erected after 1908, particularly at Batnikama and Matnilabasa, and their style and dimensions were prescribed by law. The rooms there measured twelve feet by ten feet but the number of occupants in each room remained the same. Married couples became eligible for another room when the family exceeded five members. Detached kitchens were built for the occupants of each room, and overhanging roofs were added with spouting to drain away rain water.<sup>10</sup>

Indians whom I interviewed described life in the lines unfavourably. Four of them remembered the life as "deplorable", two stressed that they accepted suffering in the lines as being in accordance with the laws of *karma*, one broke into emotional weeping while attempting to depict the line-life, three dodged the question and said that they lived only for a short while in the lines for they were called away to work for *sahibs* (white men) as domestic servants and were accommodated well, and five gave answers similar to this quote from one of them:

The lines were crowded, and the grounds dirty and littered with rubbish. Our mud and straw houses in India were far better than



the lines. We moved independently at home and cleaned our own house and surroundings. But here, if we cleaned our surroundings, somebody was sure to dirty them. We were given a small room with three bunks for ourselves and our few possessions and our firewood. We had to keep our fowls inside at night in case they were stolen. Flies and mosquitoes stayed with us too. Some *sardars* and *sahibs* commanded us occasionally to keep the place clean but they never told us how to do it. Cow dung was difficult to obtain so our floor also remained unattended for a long time.

The others did not want to talk to me about life in the line for fear, even now, that they might be deported from Fiji. One or two may have suspected my motives in asking them to describe life at that period.

If there is even a grain of truth in these views, it is clear that the living conditions in the lines were neither comfortable nor sanitary, though conditions appear to have improved by 1911. Two speakers, who came by the vessels *Ganges I* (22 July 1911) and *Mutlah II* (18 August 1911) respectively, described the conditions in the lines as better than those they had found on the ship. They emphasised that occasional visits by health inspectors kept the lines at least outwardly clean, and that fowls were then kept in boxes though the dogs still remained in the same room as the people. But they also complained that the room did not provide any privacy. For five years or more the labourers had to live in this noisy and dirty environment.



## CHAPTER 3

### *Food*

Most Indians who went to work on the plantations in Labasa, as elsewhere in Fiji, were frugal people. The Government established a law whereby the Indians were to be given rations for the first six months by the CSR Company, which was permitted to deduct two shillings and eight pence per week to cover their cost. To see that the commodities were consumed by the labourer and not sold or given away as alms, the Company gave verbal warnings to all that if they did not use the food as planned, they would go hungry. Physically weak people, unfortunately, worked little and were therefore paid little, so that after paying for the cost of rations, they had nothing left. After 1892, when the cost of daily rations was raised to five pence a day, the condition of weaker ones became pitiable. However, there were always some benevolent hearts — not only Indians but also *sahibs* — who contributed at least something to the weaker persons.

Neither the employers nor the immigrants liked prescribed rationing. For the former, distributing food and keeping a daily record was a nuisance, and for the latter, the cost was too high and the service too low. After six months on compulsory rationing, the immigrants were left to find their own food.

The occupants of each room often cooked together, for they did not have enough pots for cooking. If any person declined to eat the dishes cooked by an untouchable, he himself undertook to cook for all. Jhagru, who is still alive and lives in Waiqele, told me :

I was an *Ahir* (herdsman and cultivator) by birth but my friends were all *Chamar* (low caste). I did not like to stay with them but could not help it. However, I was determined not to eat if they cooked. I frankly told them so. So they asked me whether I would like to cook. I didn't mind. Thenceforth if ever I wanted to eat with them I had to make sure that I cooked the food and I distributed them their share.

However, according to my informants, there were relatively few such cases.

Once the immigrants became free to choose their own diet, each of the participants of the room contributed two pence to four pence a day to buy rice, tinned food, tomatoes, onions, garlic, spices, tea, sugar and salt from European-owned shops, from free Indians or from Fijians. The Indians themselves did not own any land and therefore could not grow vegetables or roots to supplement their diet.<sup>11</sup> Forced by these



circumstances, they usually went to the bush on Sundays and foraged for roots and wild fruits. Sometimes the Fijians who were more used to Indians offered roots and vegetables in exchange for good curry. For meat the workers reared poultry and goats. In short, the food of the immigrants was generally satisfactory for routine field work, though perhaps inadequate for sustained heavy work.

When I inquired whether the food they ate in Fiji was better than what they had had in India, the unanimous view of three North Indians was to this effect :

Food shortage in India was only during the famine years. We grew our own food and stored a great deal. Sometimes we sold the surplus for money. But in Fiji, the indenture system did not allow us to plant anything until we became free. Had I known that in advance, I would not have come. We had heard that one could make a fortune in Fiji (which we were told was near Calcutta).

Two Telegu-speaking South Indians gave me a similar answer:

No, we never ran short of food in India. We had plenty of milk to drink, an abundance of rice to eat, adequate vegetables and plenty of meat. I came with my mother, who ran away from home because she was beaten by my father. I used to get a lot of things to eat in our country, but here my mother could not afford to buy enough. As soon as I became nine, I began to work. I told the *sahib* that I was fifteen and so was employed. You know, my mother was very pretty but she worked so hard in the sun that she became very dark and her face turned dangerous. She would beat us for nothing . . . but then she would begin crying herself after beating us. We could guess her psychological turmoil and it was clear from the way she was growing weaker day by day . . . .

And again a Tamil emphasized:

In Labasa we procured a variety of food but hardly got enough for a full stomach. In India we ate a stomach-full, but could not afford to buy a variety of food because we tried to save money and could live on what we produced.

Their answers suggest that not all Indians who came under indenture contracts to Labasa suffered from food shortage at home. However, the history of India at the earlier period of migration does show that there were periodic famines of great severity. It is possible, therefore, that even if a shortage of food was not usual, the probability of further famines in India was not very encouraging for the migrants to stay at home, at least not in the earlier phase when the consequences of famine were quite predictable and when it was rumoured that Fiji was a paradise. Moreover, if not all of India suffered from food shortage,



some districts did. The impact of malnutrition and starvation could have been felt by those who were less privileged, like the untouchables. I should confess that the people whom I interviewed were probably better off than others; nevertheless it seems that, in general, if the diet of the Indians was not healthy in India, most of them had enough to eat. It must also be recognized that the diet in Labasa was not bad enough to cause inability to do average work.



## CHAPTER 4

### *Medical Care*

No employer wants an employee to become sick or to die. Sickness or death could cause not only labour shortage and hence financial loss, but it could also lead to public censure.<sup>12</sup> In the beginning the planters and the *Fiji Times*<sup>13</sup> opposed the introduction of Indian labour. But once Indians had been introduced and their initiative and hard work noticed, the attitude generally changed. The Government required a plantation with more than five immigrants to have a 'hospital'. Consequently a 'hospital' was established at the mill (almost on the site of the present public hospital) on the Labasa estate, and later another one at Matnilabasa. These hospitals were equipped just for immediate and superficial treatment, but only in very serious cases were the immigrants admitted to the central hospital of Labasa.

The CSR Company attempted to find some trustworthy European with some knowledge of medicine to be a hospital attendant or medical orderly at each hospital. Some Indian male attendants and nurses were also appointed on the CSR pay-roll to assist the medical orderlies. The Government of Fiji appointed a Medical Officer at the central hospital in Labasa to see that the immigrants received medical attention. The District Medical Officer was required by law to pay at least one visit a week to the estate hospitals and to supervise the medical orderlies, and he was required to inspect the labour lines at least twice a year. Commenting on visits by the District Medical Officer to the lines, an immigrant said:

Sometimes before any officer arrived in our line, we were asked by either the *sahib* or the *sardar* to get the line clean. The very news used to frighten us. We knew the result if we failed to obey their command. So we used to get busy. When he arrived, he would talk very fast with our accompanying boss. He would hardly enter our sleeping, eating and cooking rooms, but would look like a cat in the toilets and in the vicinity of the lines and then would be gone.

And again, another reported:

We were never told about the arrival of the big doctor. Once or twice a year, a new *sahib* would suddenly appear, peep into our rooms, shake his head, lift his nose up to smell 'something', point at the overgrown grass to the accompanying *sahib*, talk very fast, gesturing at our toilets, and then walk away smartly. Sometimes



he would ask us whether we liked the place. We would complain about the crowded room, about theft, about heavy work, and other hardships. Once he was gone, our complaints remained only complaints and nothing came out of them.<sup>14</sup>

Another, who seemed to be joking, emphasised:

I think one white man used to come sometimes twice a year. He was a fat man. My uncle used to tell me he was a doctor. I remember the incidents which took place later on. One funny fellow used to imitate that white man's visit. He would walk like a soldier with another man beside him. While walking, he would talk incredibly fast, nod a couple of times to the comments made by the accompanying Indian (who acted like a *sahib*), enter the room and point at the bed, the tools and firewood, etc., sniff at the toilet, talk rapidly as if in argument with the other chap, and then would break up into laughter.

The interviews clearly substantiated that the District Medical Officer *did* visit the lines, but since he was accompanied by the plantation overseer, it is highly probable that he was greatly influenced by his. Perhaps it was this that led the District Medical Officer only to inquire, and then to forget, about the complaints made by the immigrants. The interviews showed that not all District Medical Officers inspected the lines superficially: some were very critical and observant, as is evidenced by their argument with the overseer. This is also substantiated by the fact that in 1908 a heated debate took place in the Legislative Council when it was proposed to improve the living conditions of the Indians in the lines. To give the picture perspective, it is necessary to quote the essentials of the debate.

Mr. Brown . . . The principal Ordinance, No. 1 of 1891, provided for 300 cubic feet and the increase to 50 . . . superficial feet means an increase to the employer of 70 per cent at least . . . it seems to be a considerable rise indeed without any cause whatever . . . the free coolies live in much smaller houses than those at present provided for indentured men. Clause No. 9 provides that a verandah of not less than five feet in width . . . with spouting and down-pipes. Up to the present I believe no verandah has been required. I am informed that when spouting is put on, the coolie makes a hole in it and puts his own tub under it so that it is wasted. With regard to Section 14, dealing with kitchens: I believe when a coolie has a kitchen, he does not use the public kitchen. It is a waste of money to force the planter to build a kitchen.

Mr. Fox . . . the cubic feet dimension laid down by the principal Ordinance I consider quite sufficient if the ventilation is satisfactory.



Mr. Witherow . . . With regard to the superficial area of these rooms: it seems to give larger floor space in preference to the height of the building. It comes to the same thing as before — there is really no difference. The regulations say nothing about the height. I think it is only necessary to have kitchens when you have wooden floors to your coolie lines, and then they cannot cook inside their lines — but they will — and I can speak from experience. My lines have wooden floors, and it is difficult to prevent them from building their fires on those wooden floors. Unless a coolie can keep his firewood in his house he cannot keep it at all, for when he got back from work he would not find any there. I am in favour of kitchens when the lines have wooden floors but not where there are earthen floors.

*The Agent-General of Immigration* . . . The Indian Immigration Ordinance of 1878 provided that employers should provide suitable house accommodation, containing a minimum space of 300 cubic feet per adult, but no superficial area was provided for. The area now proposed, viz. 50 superficial feet, is that which has been provided by Ordinance in each of the four principal colonies employing indentured Indians, and has been so for years . . . the Government of India would not approve of Indians being at any disadvantage in this respect as compared with other colonies . . . . No doubt employers have found it cheaper and more economical to increase the height rather than to provide floor space. I may take, as an instance of the accommodation given to immigrants, a type of dwelling provided on large plantations, which is about 90 feet in length, 10 feet high, and contains 26 rooms, in each of which there may be three adults, i.e. 78 in all. Each room measures 10 feet by 7 feet on the floor, but half the internal space is taken up by a sleeping-shelf about 5 feet wide, on which two inmates sleep, the third sleeping on the floor. There is actually only floor space of 5 feet by 7 feet for these Indians to live in, to store their requirements, and to cook. They also manage to keep fowls and goats there. The rooms are lighted only from the door . . . . The door has to be shut when it rains . . . the regulations only apply to buildings to be erected hereafter and not to those at present in use . . . . The immigrants have no other place but their houses to build their fires in at present. They do most of their cooking at night, and the inconvenience of so many fires is at times very great. It is a risk likely to vitiate the insurance also . . . . Whether they are allowed or not, they erect large additions to their rooms with bagging, and in which they cook, and keep their firewood. These additions are very insanitary and have to be removed as they obscure the light and harbour vermin and filth, but it is a hardship to the Indians that they should be compelled to remove



them. I have not the slightest doubt that if cooking places were provided Indians would use the cooking-sheds if the space provided were sufficient.

*The Acting Chief Medical Officer . . .* After an experience of seven or eight years in a large coolie district, I can say that I frequently found in visits, both day and night, that the ventilation was very defective, and in some cases at night it was especially abominable. The houses were very often blocked up by a collection of firewood, food, cooking pots and live-stock in many instances inside the building. I do not think the superficial space by any means too much, and I think it should be adhered to . . . . Verandahs are frequently closed in by coolies with bags and boxes, and structures of that sort; and the closing of these verandahs certainly does not add to the comfort of the people or to the excellence of their health. If they had large verandahs they would not be so apt to close them in, and the employers would have less trouble in ordering these structures to be removed.<sup>15</sup>

Thus while Indians thought that their complaints remained unattended to, the debate shows that some medical officers did report their insanitary living conditions to the Chief Medical Officer, who in turn informed the Agent-General of Immigration. The lack of action was partly because the matter needed to be scrutinized, evaluated and processed in the Executive Council before being enacted into law, and partly because the pressure for change was not sufficiently strong or well organized.

The hospitals were constructed in conformity with the law, but they were not usually occupied. Most of the time the only occupants of the wards were the beds, for the patients preferred to spend their days and some of their nights on the verandahs. Medicines were supplied but some immigrants felt that they were being given only water. Some patients complained of being dealt with roughly, unkindly or unsympathetically.

Since the hospital staff had only the most rudimentary medical knowledge, almost all maladies or complaints were classified as debility or dysentery. Prior to 1900, contaminated water, undernourishment and insanitary living were the main causes of sickness. Greater efforts were then made to improve the health of the workers, especially after 1908. Yet, despite the improvement in the residences, toilets and water supply, very little endeavour was made to eradicate the real misery of the indentured Indians. Hook-worm (ankylostomiasis) was prevalent, but its effects were not realized until later, though it took increasing toll of the physically and psychologically weak people and exacted a heavy toll of life. Venereal disease was not unknown either:



what else could be expected when there was a disproportionate distribution of males to females? Sores, yaws, ulcers, diarrhoea, tuberculosis and many kinds of fever remained widespread as the result of the social conditions under which the indentured labourers lived. Most of those who survived and were weakened by sickness not only felt lethargic but were unable to do heavy work. Because hook-worm and many other diseases showed no visible or outward signs of suffering, their existence was not acknowledged or understood. The victims, being weak, were given limited tasks, so they earned little, and got dispirited and exhausted, and some committed suicide.<sup>16</sup>

Except for three months before and after child-birth, when they were fed by the employer, women had to labour in the field, and sometimes with small children. Infants were either left with old women at home or else carried into the fields in small baskets. Disease and inadequate feeding and lack of attention by mothers (who were so involved with work that they had little time to spend with their children) led to a high death rate among the children, much higher than in other colonies to which Indian labour was sent, a fact which the Colonial Office drew to the attention of the Fiji Government in 1914.<sup>17</sup> Those children who survived ran wild until, at fifteen years of age, they were employed.<sup>18</sup> It is little wonder that the childhood aimlessness and lack of control found occasional expression at adolescence in conflict with the overseers.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Work on the Plantations*

Most immigrants were employed as plantation labourers or mill-workers, but some were made *sardars* (foremen), domestic workers, water carriers, gardeners or watchmen. These jobs were light and appeared respectable and prestigious to the immigrants in contrast to field work. They did not involve the severe punishments which were occasionally inflicted on field employees, and were better paid. Naturally the immigrants preferred those jobs, and endeavoured to impress the overseers by their friendly disposition and hard work. When Jhagru and David Yankar Sami were asked how they secured the then respectable and better paid jobs as cooks, the former replied:

I don't know. You know I'm quite fair; probably my skin colour played a great part in my appointment as a cook. But then, my record could not have been bad too: it's probable that my good record was also a cause of my appointment. On the very first day that I was sent with my friends to cut the sensitive grass in the Matnilabasa plantation, I went red with heat. In the afternoon the *sardar* told me that the *sahib* wanted to see me. When I went to see him, he gave me a letter and sent me to a European-owned shop. There I was given new clothes. On my return I was made a cook. I remained a cook for fifteen years.

David Yankar Sami, however, confessed that he did not know why he was made a cook. Nevertheless, his short weak stature led me to speculate that probably his physical build was the cause of his appointment, as he was not physically equipped for heavy labour.

The interview of eighteen other immigrants showed that their main impressions were that *sardars* were usually persons who looked strong, were senior to others, smart, talkative, capable of organizing, authoritative, and could read and write to some extent in English and Hindustani. Stablemen were those who showed admiration and care for the animals. The gardeners were often the physically weak people. The cooks or domestic servants were usually chosen from those immigrants who respected white men, appeared clean, looked delicate in constitution, had some previous experience of cooking, could understand the white men's Hindustani, could be trusted and were Christians.<sup>19</sup> The hospital staff were often recruited from those who appeared neat and fair in skin colour, were of delicate physical build, showed dexterity in bodily movement and seemed to have some knowledge of how to take care of patients. Water carriers were often ladies, but some physically weak men were also chosen. Watchmen were all men of



strong build and considered to be trustworthy, and the constables were tall, strong in stature, obeyed the bosses without question and could read and write in English and Hindustani to some extent. Education and trained skills played a great role in the appointment to such positions. No one in my sample considered that a person of higher caste was appointed to the better positions. My second interview with them confirmed that it was usually on the basis of these criteria, rather than caste, that the immigrants were chosen for these 'respected' positions.

These 'respected' positions were much desired, but very few were able to obtain them. Some of those who managed to secure such posts encountered other frustrations, as is evident in the comments of a cook:

I had not worked for long when one day I had a quarrel with the *memsahib* (*sahib's* wife). She appeared to hate me. Whenever the *sahib* was absent, she compelled me to do the same piece of work again and again. Tired with the frequent commands and authoritarian attitude, I refused to obey her one day. She rushed to me with unexpected anger. As she passed over a lying sack, I pulled one end of it. She fell flat on her back. I darted out of the room, across the lawn, through the trees and reached my friend's house, sweating and panting. In the afternoon the *sahib* came to see me and took me back. On my way, I explained to him why I had run away. He did not say anything but patted my back. From that day onward, she never dared to quarrel with me but often helped me and talked to me politely.

However, these frustrations were of minor importance when compared with those in field work. The field workers' day started at about 3 or 4 a.m. Those who lived near the mill got up on hearing the mill whistle but those who dwelt farther away, like in Matnilabasa, had to be woken by the *sardar*, who was responsible for seeing that everybody was on his or her feet getting ready for the day's work. The indentured women reported the situation they witnessed every day during their adolescence:

If we failed to hear the mill whistle or the *sardar's* first call, we would not get up in time. The second time the *sardar* came, he would growl and ask us to get ready forthwith. If we complained that we had not yet cooked food, he would not give us time. We had to get ready with our tools and walk with the rest without bathing or brushing or breakfasting. Sometimes we reached the place before dawn and waited for the overseer and the *sardar* to arrive. They allotted us our tasks by measuring the distance with a rope.

Though the tasks were individually assessed, they worked in gangs under a *sardar*, the female gangs being separate from the male. Gillion (1962, pages 108-9) describes how, during the slack season, employers often excused the women from hard work, but in busy seasons they had to do almost the same type and amount of work as men. Some immigrants became disgusted or overwhelmed by the type and amount of work, and resorted to loafing, gambling, commission of crimes and selling their services as prostitutes.

Once work started in the morning, there was no break until the *sardar* or the overseer disappeared from sight. Then some would hurriedly shave, exchange curry and devour their breakfast. This usually took place about 10 a.m. when the overseer went away for refreshment. Most workers dared not risk getting caught during working hours, and so had to wait until noon to break their fast. At noon they would gulp some tea, eat whatever they had taken or was left from breakfast, and rest until 1 p.m. Women with young children to attend to got no rest. Those who did not want to rest isolated themselves under the shade of a tree and told stories about their birth-place or cracked jokes to entertain those who were depressed or homesick.

The typical work on sugar-cane plantations in Labasa consisted of weeding, digging or cleaning drains, planting cane-cuttings, trashing, harvesting and loading cane. Shovel-ploughing by hand was undertaken in the early years, but was soon replaced by horse-drawn ploughs. The amount of work a person had to do depended largely on the nature of the soil, the state of the cane, the physical condition of the workers and the amount of work that needed to be done.

Two methods of work allocation were employed. The first was known as the 'task'. This was the statutory amount of work that an immigrant was assumed to be able to do in six hours' consistent work.<sup>20</sup> The other was known as the 'timework', which meant working to the clock for nine hours with an hour's break at midday.

According to my informants the 'task' was no better than the daily nine hours' work, and they claim that the amount of work people do today is only half that done during the indenture period. The planters often gave such difficult 'tasks' to the immigrants that only the strongest were able to complete them within six hours. The stronger ones tended to finish by noon but many weak immigrants dragged on with the task and had to be assisted. Even then some were not able to finish the stipulated job until mid-afternoon.

Prior to 1905, the CSR Company rewarded managers and overseers with bonuses for economical production.<sup>21</sup> The managers, overseers and *sardars* therefore competed to obtain maximum production at mini-



mum cost by economizing on labour. The outcome was over-tasking of the immigrants, although after 1905 over-tasking was less prevalent. Increases in sugar production, the expansion of estates, and the presence and complaints of the resident inspectors made the CSR Company more aware of Government scrutiny, and it circulated a letter to its overseers forbidding over-tasking. Unfortunately, over-tasking was inherent in the overseer system, and consequently only limited attempts were made to avoid it in practice. Immigrants could not avoid doing the work allotted to them, for if they avoided it, they were not paid one shilling a day. Gillion observed that this was a problem not only for the weaker and inexperienced ones, but also for those of average physique. If men failed to earn a shilling and women seven pence a day, they had to make up somehow, as otherwise they might not have enough money for food. Some workers with physical disabilities worked only a three-quarter task and were paid proportionately less, but then they ate little and in the end this often broke their health completely. Not until 1914, when public censuring had increased considerably, were the immigrants able to earn more for less work. But then the price of commodities had gone up too. So the Indians continued to work longer hours than were recommended by the Immigration Ordinance.<sup>22</sup>

## CHAPTER 6

### *The Inspector on the Plantation*

Because of the number of complaints made to the Government by immigrants, it was decided to send inspectors twice a year to each plantation in Fiji.<sup>23</sup> After 1898, it was deemed necessary to appoint additional inspectors, and the rate of inspection was increased to eight per year at six weekly intervals. By 1900, one special inspector was established in Labasa to inspect plantations in that area.

Prior to 1898, the inspector never made a formal visit without notifying the planter or the manager. The planter usually responded to the inspector's courtesy with such dignity and hospitality (including giving drinks and meals in some cases) that too often the inspector dared not complain against the planter. After 1898, however, a remarkable improvement was made in the mode of inspection: the inspector commenced to examine pay lists, lines, hospital, water and fuel supplies and toilet facilities more carefully. Moreover, he did his best to assemble the people and listen to their complaints, and suggested remedies to the employer or immigrant. Where conciliation appeared difficult, charges were brought against the person accused. But immigrants believed, often with some justification, that it was usually the 'white man' who won the case.<sup>24</sup>

The workers' complaints were recorded in the inspector's diary and reported to Suva. When serious Indian grievances remained unattended to, the immigrants themselves sometimes went to Suva to complain. When these complaints began to mount heavily by 1908, the Immigration Department circulated a letter to employers as follows:

In view of the frequent complaints made to the Inspector of this Department by indentured Indian immigrants of assaults committed upon them by overseers or *sardars*, it would appear that the practice of striking or 'cuffing' indentured immigrants by persons in authority is of frequent occurrence upon some plantations.

I am directed to point out for the careful consideration of employers that the practice above referred to is from all points of view undesirable and is strongly disapproved by the Government of this Colony.<sup>25</sup>

The circular further threatened offenders with prosecution.

The criteria for appointment as an inspector made it difficult to employ an impartial man. He had to have knowledge of Indian labourers and plantation conditions, to know English and spoken Hindustani, to



have the confidence of the magistrates and planters and to be conversant with the system of giving tasks. The only people who could satisfy the above criteria were the overseers. Hence almost all inspectors were appointed from the ranks of the CSR Company's overseers.

Since the inspector had much in common with the overseers, his comments and criticisms, his attitude and outlook tended to be much in conformity with the planters. Occasional conflicts did arise between them, but because he belonged to the same social group and was mostly dependent on the CSR supplies for survival, little was reported against them. Thus the inspectors were inhibited from administering justice properly. This was the principal reason why so many violent acts escaped the scrutiny of the law, and helps to explain why inspectors did not win the confidence of the workers. In 1910, the Colonial Office forbade the recruitment of inspectors from those connected with the sugar industry, and suggested that the Fiji Government secured inspectors from among the Government cadets, who were appointed from England. But this was not generally done and former company overseers continued to be employed as inspectors.<sup>26</sup>

The indentured Indians were aware of the nepotism and favouritism that existed between the inspector and the employer or the overseer. The immigrants looked at all Europeans with suspicion, and regarded them as though they were all related. According to my informants, if the white men had not been related to each other, why would they have united to take action against the Indians in cases where faults lay with the Europeans? They asserted that sometimes a visiting relative of an overseer soon got employed and became a boss over the immigrants. They felt that they had come to Fiji on false promises or assumptions, that they had not been told of the penal nature of the contract. Thus they regarded Europeans with suspicion. The inspector's unsympathetic behaviour towards them and his being always in the company of the overseer showed that they were on good terms. Occasional inspectors did show signs of honesty and won Indian confidence, but even they were never fully trusted by the immigrants. Shiulagni of Vunivau, Labasa, reports of her own experience:

We were always told by the *kulambar* (overseer) about the arrival of the inspector, but he would never let us give a fair account of ourselves to him. Before the inspector arrived, the *kulambar* would come to us in the field, assemble us all, look at us with red fiery eyes, stare at some complaining type of people and begin: "The inspector will be here one of these days. He will ask you some questions and then will be gone. If you report anything against your bosses (meaning the *sardar* and himself), we will come to know it. You know, we white men can find out things quickly. But before we can find out, your *sardar* will find out about your

reports. He has got friends among you. You should be able to guess what the outcome will be if you pinch the serpent. You have to work under me all the time. Don't spoil your chances of survival in five minutes' talk!" After he was gone, the *sardar* would begin his harangue, "You've heard the *sahib*. He is right. You have to live and the only good way to live is to obey your superiors. The inspector will just write down your report but will do nothing. He might only advise us, but who has got the key to your future? WE. Now move to your sections of work."

Thus threatened, many immigrants dared not report, except in extreme cases where abuses had been absolutely intolerable. If the immigrants reported the abuse, some inspectors would think it to be a form of discourteous trap to get the overseer in trouble. Thus the inspectors failed to get a real insight into the daily life of immigrants on the plantation.



## CHAPTER 7

### *Relationships between Employer, Sardar and Immigrants*

Failure to complete tasks in time meant, according to the evidence of the immigrants of Labasa, being beaten with a whip or a stick. Shiulagni explained how she and others used to be beaten on the Labasa estate:

Even though we could buy a lot of food for two pence, some of us could never become strong workers. I was a water carrier during the latter part of my service and so had the opportunity to see every man and woman at work. If any lazy one was found idling, or if anyone was found resting in the shade during working hours, he or she was often hit with a whip. It was usually in the afternoon that people became exhausted. Some who could not work any longer pleaded to be given time. Occasionally they used to be excused and the time was extended to finish the work by six. But sometimes the *sardar* and the *kulambar* remained unsympathetic and lashed the worker if he slowed his work. I remember so many cases where immigrants received more than twelve cuts. Their backs used to swell up, they could not sit down properly and had to be treated at home. Most beatings took place on either Fridays or Saturdays, probably with the intention of enabling the victim to recover from wounds on Sundays.

Narsamma gave a similar account:

Neither the *kulambar* nor the *sardar* felt any pity for the workers. We had two alternatives on the cane farm: either finish the task or get a couple of canes. No one preferred the second, for the punishment used to be 'hot'. If we tried to run away before the beating ended, the *sahib's* wrath would increase. The *sahib* would never forget and the beating would follow next day. If we accepted the punishment, remained standing and only writhed and screamed at each stroke, beating stopped after we showed signs of pain and suffering. In most cases a beating was followed by a loud hoot of laughter by the *kulambar* and the *sardar*. The *sardar* used to favour the *kulambar* and never opposed him on any occasion. However, some Indians who were strongly built frequently helped us to finish the task. In the presence of such stronger people, the *sahib* dared not touch us. He knew how in the past stronger immigrants snatched the whip from either the *sahib's* or *sardar's* hand and beat him back. Even if a stronger man pro-



voked a *sardar*, the *sardar* would only say, "Don't work here; go to the jail and carry loads of soil!" Then he would walk away and wait for the chance to find him alone.

Another lady, who nearly fell victim to rape, explained:

I had just entered into a bond to serve the CSR Company for five years when I was transferred to the cane farm. For one week nothing happened. I observed so many people, including ladies, getting beaten but nobody said anything to me. I was not too young to establish new acquaintances carefully. I knew I was fifteen. I could see most male youths eyeing me. Rumours were already in the air about so many rape cases inflicted mostly by outrageous *sardars* and *kulambar*s. So I kept a special look out on their movements. But the *kulambar*'s dealings were very different with me and I liked him. He did not look very old. Whenever he came to see my work, he eyed me for some time and then said, "Bahut acha" ("Very good"). One day he allocated my task near the Cavaira mangrove.<sup>27</sup> He separated my area from the second lady by about five chains. The cane was above our height. I did not suspect anything for he looked like a gentleman. At about 11 a.m. he arrived without the *sardar* at the place where I was cutting grass. As usual, he congratulated me on my hard work and offered me a piece of chocolate. That made me suspicious, for his behaviour was quite unusual. I refused to accept it. After saying, "Don't exhaust yourself", he walked away. At about 11.30 a.m. I went out of the cane-field to the mangrove to take a rest on the raised bank under the shade. As I sat down and got rid of the knife and guava-hook, with which I had been collecting grass, I saw the para grass about ten yards from me move and make a rustling sound. Before I realized what it was, a huge figure leaped at me and grabbed me. I screamed, he reached for my mouth, I bit his hand, he uttered "Bastard", I screamed again and smacked him on the face. Now we were face to face, I tried to reach for the knife but could not do it. He tore my blouse. I pleaded with him not to do that, but he was furious. He tried to reach for my skirt, I kicked him, tore his face with my fingers, and got hold of his hair. He became red and slapped me. We struggled only for some minutes before I realized that a part of my skirt was torn off. But by then a number of women had arrived. We all beat the *kulambar* properly — tore parts of his trousers and then let him go. My girl friends told me later that they had suspected such a thing for a week because the *kulambar* always stared at me differently and gave me different treatment from the rest. On that particular day my companions were ready to act on any kind of small noise, and they did. When the men heard this, they swore about the *kulambar* and made arrangements to kill him. However, before taking any serious



step, they decided to inform the *bara kulambar* (big *sahib*). The report was not accepted as trivial news. It compelled the big *sahib* to transfer the aggressor.

Of the incidents of violence on the plantations, not all of those inflicted by the overseers or *sardars* resulted from inability to work. Sometimes the immigrants provoked the overseer to attack. At other times, inability to understand Indian ways, or the tempting physical build of some adolescent females, were the causes of assault.

Two typical kinds of attack were made on the immigrants. The first took place for a small cause and was intended to warn others; the second was inflicted heavily when there were not witnesses present. In any case any witnesses were either intimidated or bribed from bearing witness. Gillion (1962, pages 113-4) gives a detailed analysis including such examples as one which occurred in 1897, when the Sergeant of Police at Labasa wrote to his Superintendent in Suva:

. . . it is a usual thing for Indians to come to the Police Station between the hours of 9 and 12 at night to complain of the treatment they get on some of the plantations, and when asked why they are so late they say that they have to wait until dark as the *sardars* watch them and will not let them go. This is when they have been beaten during the day and if the overseers hear that they have been to the Police Station they get their money cut, also get heavy tasks to perform and most likely another thrashing. Directly the overseer hears that the *sardar* has beaten any of the people he at once cautions the one who got the beating and all who saw it that if they go to complain to the S.M. or Sergt. that he will beat them and give them heavy work to do. The consequence is that when any of the people are ill used they cannot get any of those who saw it to go as witness for them because of these threats.<sup>28</sup>

Sometimes, despite the bruises on his body, an Indian would not confess to the police that he had been beaten, or would even deny the truth. How *could* he tell the truth? If he did, he had to face the court, induce witnesses to appear on his behalf, lose a couple of days' pay, arouse the overseer's resentment and expose his companions to victimization from the *sardar* and the overseer. On top of all this he could seldom win the case, for the overseer usually had professional legal help; the majority of verdicts were in favour of overseers. The Indian, who was more used to traditional village *pancyayats*, could do very little in the context of legally dominated western courts.

Not all overseers or *sardars*, however, escaped conviction. Some overseers were punished, even though the sentences were very light. This inequality of treatment was highly resented by Indians. Forster, as Agent-General, perceived this quite early in 1902:



I may add again what I have often said that the very different punishments meted out for acts of violence by Europeans or by Indians, respectively, do not escape the knowledge of the latter, and it is in human nature to resent them. They no doubt believe that "what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander". Failing the employer's action to prevent violence by Overseers and *sardars* . . . the S.M. has it largely in his power to discourage such acts, which only serve to further violence.<sup>29</sup>

Returning to the plantation after prosecuting the *sahib* or the *sardar* was a most frightening experience for the immigrant. If the court judgement fell against the *sardar*, the fines were deliberately and publicly refunded to him by the overseer and he was encouraged to beat the immigrant more.<sup>30</sup> In any case, the mere report against the overseer or the *sardar* was treated as an offence. As punishment, the Indian was beaten, deprived of privileges such as permission to leave the plantation on Sundays, given heavy work in the sun and rain (the pay for which was lowered sometimes) or prosecuted if he ever committed any error, whether accidental or deliberate. Consequently, many Indians had no faith in the law, and some, without caring for the consequences, assaulted their bosses or each other to get psychological gratification.

Only a very small percentage of cases were brought directly to the police and, in the light of weak and hesitant Indian complaints, nothing very concrete could be taken up against overseers and *sardars*. At the same time, the overseers never felt justified in reporting against one of their own kind, and so the matter was usually suppressed. However, the Immigration Department did press employers to dismiss overseers or *sardars* convicted of serious assault. The management often responded favourably if the overseer or *sardar* had not proved to be a successful worker. But if he was efficient, the management simply transferred him to another plantation. The management had to respond to a request from the Immigration Department one way or the other for the Immigration Department could refuse to supply any more immigrants to that plantation.

In 1902, Labasa nearly became a centre of civil war (Gillion 1962, page 115). The root cause was the failure of the Government to take adequate action to suppress violence. The broil kept on increasing steadily from the turn of the century. For example, in 1900 there were 32 cases of assault in Labasa against those in charge of labour, and 11 convictions; in 1901, 21 charges and 15 convictions; in 1902, 23 convictions out of 53 charges of assault against overseers and *sardars*. Already in 1900 the Governor, Sir George O'Brien, had warned the Company, and asked the magistrate to inflict severe sentences in future, but very little had come of it. The reason was that, like most overseers, the magistrate believed that the only way to maintain discipline was



by not showing weakness in front of Indians. All Indian retaliations were branded as insensible acts, explained as being due to the assumption that Indians paid little regard to human life. Consequently the Indians were believed to deserve punishment, whereas the overseers did not. Some magistrates openly criticised inspectors who tried to protect wronged workers: for instance in one case Mr. Burn, the overseer, charged Surju with assault. Burn's witnesses proved that Burn pushed Surju and then struck him with a stick. Surju then picked up the working knife, but not for the purpose of hitting Burn. The Inspector pointed out that the prosecutor had been the assailant, hence the court dismissed Surju. Despite the evidence that Burn had been convicted four times for assault in the past (from his arrival in 1900 to 1902) on the same plantation of Wailevu, the magistrate complained to the Colonial Secretary in favour of him.

But Forster, the senior man in the Immigration Office, was very sympathetic to the workers' position and believed that violence by immigrants was justified and resulted from unequal and harsh treatment. Forster noted that the offenders acted under a sense of injustice:

Such offences are almost invariably I think committed under circumstances which preclude the possibility of the perpetrators escaping the legal consequences. There is firing through windows or shooting from behind a hedge or blowing up, and they are committed in broad daylight with generally available witnesses of them. Under any ordinary rules as to human conduct or motives, those circumstances would be held to indicate a sense of injustice as the probable moving impulse.<sup>31</sup>

Forster paid a special visit to Labasa in 1902. In that year an overseer was convicted of assault and, though the heavy fine inflicted on the *sahib* undoubtedly led to temporary improvement of conditions in Labasa, the incessant pressure exerted by Government and the directors of the CSR Company probably caused such a psychological strain to Forster that he died in the same year.<sup>32</sup>

## CHAPTER 8

### *Cultural Values and Social Activities*

When a migrant moves from one place to another, he takes his own cultural norms and values with him. The extent to which adherence to and development of these norms and values finds expression in the new environment will depend upon the social conditions there. Let us examine the situation of Indian immigrants in this connection.

The four major castes represented on Labasa plantations had many *jatis* (sub-castes) within them.<sup>33</sup> Some of these *jatis* were *Ahirs* (herdsmen and cultivators), *Lodhas* (cultivators), *Chamars* (leatherworkers), *Kahars* (servants), *Kumhars* (potters), *Koris* (weavers), *Jats* (cultivators), *Gonds* (tribal), *Kols* (tribal), *Ryots* (self-employed cultivators), *Tellis* (oil makers), *Kurmis* (cultivators), *Kapus* (cultivators), *Banias* (businessmen), *Parayans* (field labourers and village servants), *Balijas* (traders and cultivators), *Kammas* (cultivators), *Kewats* (cultivators, fishermen and boatmen), *Muraoes* (cultivators), *Thakurs* (land owners and defenders), *Rajputs* (land owners and defenders), and *Brahmans* (priests). *Ahirs*, *Chamars*, *Jats* and *Thakurs* were the most numerous. The *jatis* of South India predominantly comprised *Naikers* (menial workers), *Samis* (businessmen and cultivators), *Naidus* (cultivators and craftsmen), *Reddys* (landlords and business magnates), *Gounders* (land owners and cultivators), *Chettiars* (businessmen and landlords), *Pillays* (businessmen, scholars, landlords and civil servants), *Mudaliars* (businessmen), *Ascharis* (blacksmiths and goldsmiths), and *Iyers* (priests). Over all, the majority were of middle agricultural castes.

They could no longer practise strict observance of caste laws in Labasa for five reasons. First, in order to be recruited and to secure economic benefits from the famed islands of Fiji, many immigrants had promised the recruiters that they would not let the doctor or agent in India, or the CSR Company in Fiji, know their true caste identity. Most *Brahmans* got recruited by disguising themselves as men of other castes.<sup>34</sup> Second, the immigrants could not remain segregated as they had been in India. Even in the recruiting depots in India, people of different castes had to live, eat and even sleep together. While travelling on the crowded ships, they had to share all amenities with other castes. They could not avoid touching each other accidentally, or assisting each other if knocked over. On arrival in Fiji, the rooms and utensils had to be shared, and helping with minor illnesses, borrowing, and finally the creation of gangs against the *sardar* and *sahib*, could only be organized with the assistance of low caste people. All these factors compelled the immigrants to become more and more tolerant



of each other and their customs. Third, the appointment of low caste persons as *sardars* on some estates dealt a blow at the root of the caste system, especially when such *sardars* used their positions to 'get their own back' for what they had received from higher castes in India. Fourth, the social pressures from their own kind were greatly reduced compared with in India. Without all the rituals and community pressures, the immigrants came as individuals and were relatively free. This freedom was much appreciated. The only people who had to defer to were the *sardar* and the *kulambar* — not whole segments of society. There did not seem to be much sense in abiding by caste practices when they did not have much relevance to the new social and economic situation. Last but not least was the shortage of women on the plantations, for many who tried to look down upon low castes were ultimately attracted to low caste women and so broke their own rule.

However, since *Brahmans* in India belonged to the literate class, many of them brought their own holy books to Labasa and continued occasional religious discussions with other castes. Because they were more conversant with the principles of Hinduism, could speak fluently in what seemed to be correct Hindustani to other castes, and wrote letters to relatives in India for illiterate people, many of them commanded respect. Their competence in Hindu rituals gained them further honour and some became accepted as Indian priests, and performed such saintly and hereditary functions as *kathas* and *puraans* (reading of holy scriptures), conducted the celebration of the religious festivals like Deepawali, Holi, Janmastmi, Shiu Ratri, Ram Naumi and Ram Leela, and advised the immigrants on such matters as the naming of children, suitable times for *mooran* (hair shaving of the child), marriage and burial of the dead and other aspects of the life cycle. Some *Brahmans* did not have the least knowledge of how to go about the rituals and so created new rituals to maintain their status. Some of these newly formulated rituals were condemned by the veterans and in order to maintain their status such *Brahmans* were eventually forced to learn how to perform the right ones.

Seeing the modified form of caste system emerging, many low caste folk thrust themselves up the social ladder by claiming that they were born into higher castes. By adding the surnames Maharaj, Prasad, Thakur or Singh to their names, they strengthened their claim and gained recognition, even though some were spoken of derogatorily for doing so. Intercaste marriages followed and many low caste and high caste Indians became mixed castes. Yet the tendency to claim to belong to the caste of the parent of higher caste persisted.

In the absence of traditional leadership and pressures, the castes no longer segregated themselves and no longer celebrated religious or ritual



functions with such enthusiasm as they had in India. Even Muslims and Christians participated with the Hindus in celebrating Hindu holy days.

All immigrants, except those engaged in vital work, such as looking after the stock, overhauling machinery, working overtime as cooks or doing punishment for illegal offences, obtained weekly holidays from midday Saturday until 4 a.m. Monday. They usually received their weekly wages at noon on Saturdays. From one o'clock every Saturday they attended a bazaar, which was always held at the mill, and to which free Indians particularly brought commodities for sale.

Sunday was a day for the immigrants to either collect roots, wild fruits and firewood from the bush or visit other plantations, Indian settlements and Fijian villages. In any case they had to obtain permission from the employer before leaving the plantation. Some immigrants, still under indenture, managed to acquire a share with unindentured or free Indians and so spent Sunday-leave working with their partners. Some Indians went to Fijian villages to buy vegetables or exchange cloth and Indian food for Fijian eatables. Others stayed at home and formed a gang around the kava basin or gossiped or read books. According to my informants, Sunday was the most interesting part of the week for relaxing and for exchanging ideas on religion and other aspects of life.

While Sunday was a regular boon for workers' relaxation and mirth, some other Christian and Hindu holidays were also celebrated by all. These included Christmas Day, Good Friday, Moharram, Holi and sometimes others. Jhagru explained how he took part in these :

Christmas Day and Good Friday were very enjoyable and lucky days for me. On these days, after the *sahib's* family and friends had eaten, the *sahib* would dip his hand into his pocket, bring out a hand full of coins and, without counting them, place them in my hands. The sum would be no less than a week's wage. I would thank him, collect, clean and place the dishes in order, and run away home. On my way I would shop. Once I reached home, invited guests would pour in and we would drink, eat and play cards. Sometimes the intoxicated people would challenge their enemies, swear about the *sardar* and *sahib*, fight among themselves and then retire to their rooms; and sometimes they would walk away to the bush to hunt pigs.

Holi, Deepawali, Moharram and Ram Leela were other holidays which we celebrated with fun and alacrity. We celebrated Holi with coloured water and always looked for the opportunity to pour water, powder and other things on women. We visited every house, sang songs, played drums, and ate delicacies offered by the head of the household. Even adversaries would forget about their



enmity and join us in the celebration. Deepawali was celebrated likewise: we invited our *jahaji bhais* (ship-mates) and other friends, read Ramayana, distributed sweets, sent some sweets, curry and *pury* (a kind of roti cooked in oil) to *sahibs* whom we liked, and lit candles. Moharram was also celebrated with a great pomp and vigour. We feasted, sang, danced, played *hudda* (huge drum) and conducted games such as wrestling. I remember very well how my songs based on Tajia (Moharram) often made the women cry.

Other immigrants gave similar accounts and described the holiday scenes as "glorious, entertaining, full of activity and like those of heaven". They further added that Ram Leela (first started in 1902) was such an occasion that people from far and wide would come with their families and stay for days at the place of celebration in Bulileka. It lasted ten days, the last two days being the busiest and most profitable for the stall-keepers, who sold toys, clothes, musical instruments, sweets, food, fruits like cucumber, water-melon and paw-paw, and jewellery. Ram Leela terminated on Sunday after the tug-of-war and wrestling had ended and after the Ramayana hero, Ram, had killed Rawan, the master of evils.

Many *sahus* (holy men) had many *kutees* (cottages) scattered all over the localities and they conducted major festivals, read sacred books and harangued the crowd to live a religious life. Alms and donations were given most generously. Since there was no holy river in Labasa, hot springs became the focus of pilgrimages. Some Indians occasionally offered water in Labasa to the Fijian snake, Degei, the paramount god of Fiji. He was said to live on the Nakauvadra Hills in northern Viti Levu. Indians identified him as Kaliya, the serpent who was defeated by Lord Krishna in the River Jumna and was banished to a remote island.

Immorality had increased markedly by 1892 so the Government of Fiji, with the approval of the Government of India, established a form of civil marriage whereupon those who declared themselves married on their arrival in the colony were registered as such, while others had to pay 50 cents (5/-) and declare before the magistrate their intention to become husband and wife. Married couples were issued a marital certificate by the Agent-General.<sup>35</sup> Unless the marriage was registered, it was not recognized. However, though most Indians followed legal procedure, especially when marrying their children, they usually had their children betrothed either before they were born or a few days after birth. The legal procedure followed afterwards, mostly at adolescence or pre-adolescence. In some cases legal marriage came into being after the couple had borne children, but such incidents were kept secret from the law. Whenever the marriage took place, the wedding was an occasion of ceremony and entertainment.<sup>36</sup>



While the decline in moral standards was apparent in marriage, it was more so in the way people spent money. Most immigrants endeavoured to accumulate money (even if they had to go short of food to do so) and then dissipated it on illegal drinks and gambling. Quarrels or troubles arising from competition for women, drunkenness, family confusion, gambling and such matters were more frequently settled by the line *panchayats* or the village *panchayats*, depending on where the outrage had been committed. Only extreme offences were reported to the police and were solved by the magistrate. However, an attempt was always made to treat all sorts of disputes in the *panchayat*, and the voice of *panchos* (five jurymen) was regarded as "the final and true justice of God spoken through the volition of five jurymen".

Though religious decline during the indenture period led to social disorganization, it nevertheless created a very tolerant society. Initially, the Government took no interest in private religious beliefs and practice because it did not regard it as a concern of the state. However, towards the last decade of the system, the connection between social evils and the decline of religion became apparent and it began to take a more positive interest.

Social problems on the plantations went from bad to worse after the South Indians arrived, for they had difficulty in adjusting to North Indians. The main problem centred around language. Neither the North Indians nor the South Indians spoke a common language. Each spoke several languages which were incomprehensible to the other. But whereas the North Indians soon developed a Fiji version of Hindustani as a lingua franca, the South Indians were placed among them as recent minorities with different dialects and customs. It was a long time before South Indians generally became fluent in Hindi. Inevitable friction developed, and finally led to a disastrous rift. The immediate consequence was that many South Indians were psychologically disturbed, depressed and frustrated, and ultimately became prone to suicide. When the figure increased considerably among the Madrasis by 1912, the India Office expressed its concern that the rates in Fiji were ten times those in the United Provinces and Madras, and said that drastic measures ought to be taken (Gillion 1962, page 127). It was pointed out that the Indian Government knew that violence and vice were inherent in the system, and lack of freedom and unsympathetic treatment were the causes of the suicides. If no measures were taken to counteract these deficiencies, emigration would be stopped.

Indian cultural norms and values did not die out completely. The caste system of the Hindus survived, though it was considerably modified. *Brahmans* carried out the hereditary priestly work and the majority of people respected their literacy and leadership, provided they did not run counter to the authority of the *sardar* and *sahib*. Muslims



followed their own religion, and Christianity also found expression among a few. However, illegal drinking, gambling and illicit sex undermined the religious values, and the state can be blamed for not taking more active steps to curb such immoral practices. Despite the lowering of morals by comparison with India, religious festivals were celebrated with great interest, pomp and ceremony.

Even though the line-life was described by Indians as *narak* (hell), the way various sects, such as Sanatanis (orthodox Hindus), Kabir, Panthis, Ramanandi Panthis, Arya Samajis, Nanak Panthis, Satnamis, Dadu Panthis, Muslims and Christians mingled with each other in celebrating each holiday, demonstrates that the social life in the lines was not all unpleasant, or as boring and unattractive towards the later part of the indenture period as might have been expected. Only the abuses and the standard of accommodation can be depicted as hell. The indenture system was banned in 1916, though it was not until 1920 that the last contracts expired and the system died out completely. Those who remained in Fiji worked hard as free men, procreated, and have secured citizenship. The surviving workers are today admired for their work and are revered by their progeny for having "brought Fiji to successful cultivation and paved the way for us all to flourish".

## APPENDIX

### *A Form of Agreement for Intending Emigrants (in force in Madras in 1912)*

Conditions of Service and Terms of Agreement which the Recruiter is authorised to offer on Behalf of the Agent to Intending Emigrants.

1. Period of Service — Five years from the date of arrival in the Colony.
2. Nature of Labour — Work in connection with the cultivation of soil or the manufacture of the produce on any plantation.
3. Number of days on which the Emigrant is required to labour in each week — Every day, excepting Sundays and authorized holidays.
4. Number of hours in every day during which he is required to labour without extra remuneration — Nine hours on each of five consecutive days in every week commencing with the Monday of each week, and five hours on the Saturday of each week.
5. Monthly or daily wages and task-work rates — When employed at time-work every adult male Emigrant above the age of fifteen years will be paid not less than one shilling, which is at present equivalent to twelve annas and every adult female Emigrant above that age not less than nine pence, which is at present equivalent to nine annas, for every working day of nine hours; children below that age will receive wages proportionate to the amount of work done.
6. When employed at task — or ticca-work every adult male Emigrant above the age of fifteen years will be paid not less than one shilling, and every adult female Emigrant above that age not less than nine pence for every task which shall be performed.
7. The law is that a man's task shall be as much as an ordinary able-bodied adult male Emigrant can do in six hours' steady work, and that a woman's task shall be three-fourths of a man's task. An employer is not bound to allot, nor an Emigrant bound to perform more than one task in each day, but by mutual agreement such extra work may be allotted, performed and paid for.
8. Wages are paid weekly on the Saturday of each week.
9. Conditions as to return passage — Emigrants may return to India at their own expense after completing five years' industrial residence in the Colony.



10. After ten years' continuous residence every Emigrant who was above the age of twelve years on introduction into the Colony and who during that period has completed an industrial residence of five years, shall be entitled to a free return passage if he claims it within two years after the completion of the ten years' continuous residence. If the Emigrant was under twelve years of age when he was introduced into the Colony, he will be entitled to a free return passage if he claims it before he reaches 24 years of age and fulfils the other conditions as to residence.

A child of an Emigrant born within the Colony will be entitled to a free return passage until he reaches twelve years of age, and must be accompanied on the voyage by his parent or guardian.

11. Other conditions — Emigrants will receive rations from their employers during the first six months after their arrival at the plantation according to the scale prescribed by the Government of Fiji at a daily cost of four pence, which is at present equivalent to four annas, for each person of twelve years of age and upwards.
12. Every child between five and twelve years of age will receive approximately half ration free of cost, and every child, five years of age and under, nine chattacks of milk daily free of cost, during the first year after their arrival.
13. Suitable dwellings will be assigned to Emigrants under indenture free of rent and will be kept in good repair by the employers. When Emigrants under indenture are ill they will be provided with hospital accommodation, medical attendance, medicines, medical comforts and food free of charge.
14. An Emigrant who has a wife still living is not allowed to marry another wife in the Colony unless his marriage with his first wife shall have been legally dissolved; but if he is married to more than one wife in his country he can take them all with him to the Colony and they will then be legally registered and acknowledged as his wives.

(Also in Tamil and Telegu)

I agree to accept the person named on the face of this form as an Emigrant on the above conditions.

In my presence

Date.....191

Registering Officer

Recruiter for  
Fiji Government Emigration  
Agency

## NOTES

- 1 Gillion 1962, page 2.
- 2 Gordon had proposed the introduction of Indian labour to colonists as early as 1875 (*Fiji Times*, 4 September 1875). When Indians began to be brought to Fiji, they were not told about the penal nature of the contract. It was in 1911 that the Government of India proposed that recruits' attention should be drawn specifically to the penal conditions of the contract. (See Mayer 1963, page 14).
- 3 By law every 100 men were to be accompanied by 40 females. The latter were tricked and recruited.
- 4 Mayer 1961, page 3.
- 5 Gillion 1962, pages 52-3. All the South Indians I interviewed had been indentured labourers, though many South Indians came as free workers or traders.
- 6 Travelling in the same ship was a great binding force of relationship among the indentured Indians. All twenty immigrants stated that they treated their *jahaji bhais* as brothers, friends and helpers. They never dared to complain against each other and would refuse to give evidence against them. They also took the part of blood relatives in customary observances.
- 7 Because of the drop in the price of sugar, cane growing by small concerns had ceased by 1880. This enabled the expansion of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company's operations in Labasa.
- 8 The South Pacific Sugar Mills *Plantation Registers* show the introduction of indentured Indians in Labasa to have begun in 1889 whereas Mayer and Chauhan give the date as 1890. The estates mentioned above were recorded in the *SPSM Plantation Register*.
- 9 The Government of India might not have permitted Indian labourers to work for the planters in Fiji had there not been a provision that they could stay in Fiji after serving the bond. It was only after 1906 that they could lease land and cultivate cane for the CSR Company.
- 10 *Fiji Royal Gazette* 1908, page 184.
- 11 There were some exceptional cases of persons who shared with free Indians and grew some crops secretly.
- 12 The humanitarians in England, India and Fiji had already criticised the indenture system as another form of slavery. Such censure was much disliked by the Government of Fiji.
- 13 E.g. on 27 October, 1877.
- 14 This speaker, whose name was George, could speak English quite fluently.



- 15 Legislative Council Debate, 15 May 1908, pages 54-7.
- 16 Gillion 1962, pages 107-8.
- 17 In 1913 the average Indian infant mortality rate for the whole of Fiji was 83.75 per thousand (Gillion 1962, page 107).
- 18 Some children were employed earlier in order to alleviate the cost of living on parents. Two in my sample stated that they began working before they were twelve.
- 19 David Yankar Sami and George were Christians who were cooks during the indenture period in Labasa.
- 20 Gillion 1962, page 109. My informants reported that unfortunately some planters and sardars allotted excessive tasks.
- 21 Gillion 1962, pages 109-10.
- 22 Gillion (1962, page 110) records that in 1902 the average wage of indentured immigrants was as follows: males 11.52d per working day but 12.79d per day for those who actually completed the work; and females 6.14d per working day, 7.6d per day for those who actually worked. There was a slight increase (less than 1d) in the next decade.
- 23 Gillion 1962, pages 110-2.
- 24 Almost all twenty I interviewed spoke of either experiencing or hearing of white men winning most of the cases of which they had personal knowledge. Gillion's study confirms and elaborates on the disadvantage that the workers were under in this relationship.
- 25 Quoted in Gillion 1962, page 117.
- 26 Gillion 1962, page 111.
- 27 Cavaira is located north-west of the Labasa Hill. The incident took place on the Estate of Labasa.
- 28 Gillion 1962, page 113.
- 29 Colonial Secretary's Office *Minute Paper* 4411/1902.
- 30 C.S.O. 4215/1899.
- 31 C.S.O. 3121/1893.
- 32 Gillion 1962, page 116.
- 33 Some of these *jatis* could be described more accurately as tribes rather than castes. Each *jati* had a specific function to perform, hence their categorization.
- 34 *Brahmans* were not wanted by the recruiters because it was feared that since they belonged to a more educated and intellectual class, they would look into the conditions of the indenture contract before signing it, and thus expose the deception of the recruiters. Secondly, *Brahmans* were not menial workers, and thirdly, they were a



very exclusive group and might have refused to associate themselves with other castes. Gillion (1962, pages 123-6) gives a fuller account of changes and adjustments and this was used as a basis for entry in caste relationships enquiries.

35 Gillion 1962, page 125; C.S.O. 2344/1890; *Fiji Ordinance I*, 1892. Some children were married at eight by word of mouth, and most such marriages were consummated at adolescence.

36 There is evidence to prove that an immigrant could take away his friend's wife as a permanent married partner if he ever helped to prevent his companion from going to jail. This could be done by paying off his fine.

### Oral Sources\*

(All were indentured labourers except Ram Sarup, who lived during the indenture period as a child).

#### NAME

1. Abdul	80+	Tua Tua, Labasa
2. Birau	80+	Old People's Home, Labasa
3. Chinndesham	83+	Vunivau, Labasa
4. Dhansi	76+	Old People's Home, Labasa
5. Gangaia	81+	Old People's Home, Labasa
6. George	70+	Old People's Home, Labasa
7. Gounder, Deo Naiker	70+	Vunivau, Labasa
8. Guruwaia	70	Old People's Home, Labasa
9. Guttai	70	Naua, Labasa
10. Jahori	80+	Bulileka, Labasa
11. Jeet, Indar	72+	Vuniyayalayala, Labasa
12. Jhagru	73+	Waiqeale, Labasa
13. Lingaia	107+	Malau, Labasa
14. Manaru	78+	Vunivau, Labasa
15. Ragru	81+	Old People's Home, Labasa
16. Ratan, Shiu	73+	Old People's Home, Labasa
17. Reddy, Chench	76+	Sea Sea, Labasa
18. Reddy, Ram	78+	Vunivau, Labasa
19. Sami, David Yankar	74+	Vunivau, Labasa
20. Sarup, Ram	65+	Vunivau, Labasa
21. Shiulagni	78+	Vunivau, Labasa

\* My main informants were numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21 and a lady by the name of Laksmi, who did not want to be interviewed by any except a few "respected people". Other informants are anonymous at their request because they did not wish to be "exposed to public scrutiny".



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